

Umatilla: Making Chemical Weapons History

Community pride and a small town spirit characterize the Hermiston, Ore., area. But did you know that this region also is playing a vital role in national and global affairs? Near Hermiston, the U.S. Army is making chemical weapons history at its Umatilla Chemical Agent Disposal Facility. This facility will destroy a large “stockpile” of chemical weapons that have been stored in the area for many years.

What are chemical weapons?

The weapons are sturdy containers of various types and sizes holding toxic chemical agents. Contrary to popular belief, chemical agents are not gases. Chemical agents are liquid in original form, however, they deteriorate into a thick, sludge-like substance over long periods of time.

Where are the weapons located?

The chemical weapons are located at the Umatilla Chemical Depot, a large military installation that opened in 1941. The depot’s primary mission was to store and maintain a variety of military items, from blankets to ammunition. When needed during U.S. military actions, the depot then sent these items to soldiers in the field. Umatilla was given an additional mission in 1962 when the depot began storing chemical weapons. This stockpile of chemical weapons was never used and has remained in safe storage. The depot reorganized for closure from 1990 to 1994, and all conventional ammunition and supplies were shipped to other U.S. installations. Today, the chemical weapons are the only items still stored at the Umatilla Chemical Depot.

What is the Umatilla Chemical Agent Disposal Facility?

The Umatilla Chemical Agent Disposal Facility is a state-of-the-art incineration facility designed to dispose of the chemical weapons stored at the Umatilla Chemical Depot safely and efficiently.



Together with its support buildings, the facility totals more than 200,000 square feet.

How will the weapons be destroyed?

The Umatilla facility will incinerate the weapons. In using this technology, robotic equipment disassembles the weapons so that each component can be treated in a separate incinerator. Specifically, chemical agent will be drained from the weapon and burned in a liquid incinerator, while the weapon’s explosive components will be destroyed in a special deactivation furnace. You can learn more about incineration in the fact sheet entitled “*Incineration: A Safe, Proven Disposal Process.*”

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Who will destroy the weapons?

The Army's Program Manager for Chemical Demilitarization is responsible for safely disposing of the stockpile. In 1997, the Army awarded Washington Demilitarization Company a contract to build, test, operate and close Umatilla's facility. Many other organizations work in partnership with the Army to complete this mission successfully. Among these are the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region X. Some of your family members, friends or neighbors probably work on this important project.

How long will it take to destroy the weapons?

Construction of the facility lasted four years until its completion in May 2001. A period of testing, called systemization, is underway and will continue until operations begin. The facility will conduct disposal activities for several years. A period to close and dismantle the facility and ensure the cleanliness of the surrounding areas will follow.

How will the environment be protected?

The permits for the facility, which the state's Environmental Quality Commission approved, were written based on studies conducted locally. This ensures that operations at the disposal facility are protective of local citizens and the Hermiston area environment. Additionally, the Umatilla project has a special monitoring program that examines the air, water, soil, plants, insects and small mammals in the area. These studies are conducted as far away as Pendleton and the Tri-Cities. This monitoring is intended to help ensure that the disposal facility will have no harmful impact on people or the surrounding areas.

What will happen to the facility and the depot once the weapons are gone?

Once incineration is completed, the disposal facility will be dismantled. The depot will be closed, and the land will be made available to the local communities.

What is the Citizens' Advisory Commission?

This commission, often called the CAC for short, is made up of nine members appointed by the governor of Oregon. Seven are local citizens and

two are representatives of state agencies that work closely with the chemical weapons disposal program. The purpose of this organization is to provide a link between your community and the Army. The members do not make program decisions, but they are encouraged to provide guidance and recommendations. The commission provides a local perspective to the Army so that it may manage the chemical disposal program in the most positive way for your community. The Oregon CAC holds regular meetings every third Thursday of the month. The meetings are announced in local papers, and people on the outreach office's mailing list receive notices of upcoming meetings. The meetings are open to the public, and you are encouraged to attend. Most meetings also include time for public input and questions.

How can I contact the CAC?

For information on the current issues the commission is considering, or to find out the upcoming meeting schedule, please call the CAC chairman at (541) 922-2574.

How can I learn more?

The Army opened the Umatilla Chemical Disposal Outreach Office in 1996 as a convenient "one-stop" source of information about the chemical disposal program. The office staff works closely with public affairs experts from the depot, the disposal facility and your local emergency preparedness office to ensure a comprehensive public involvement and outreach program. The office has a large repository of fact sheets, brochures, exhibits and technical studies for you to peruse, but this is just the beginning of what it offers. The outreach staff frequently can be seen in the Hermiston area giving presentations, holding public meetings, distributing informational materials and attending community events.

How can I contact the outreach office?

You can contact the outreach office staff at (541) 564-9339 or via e-mail at outreach@oregontrail.net. You also are invited to visit the office at 190 East Main Street in Hermiston. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Additional office hours are available upon request.